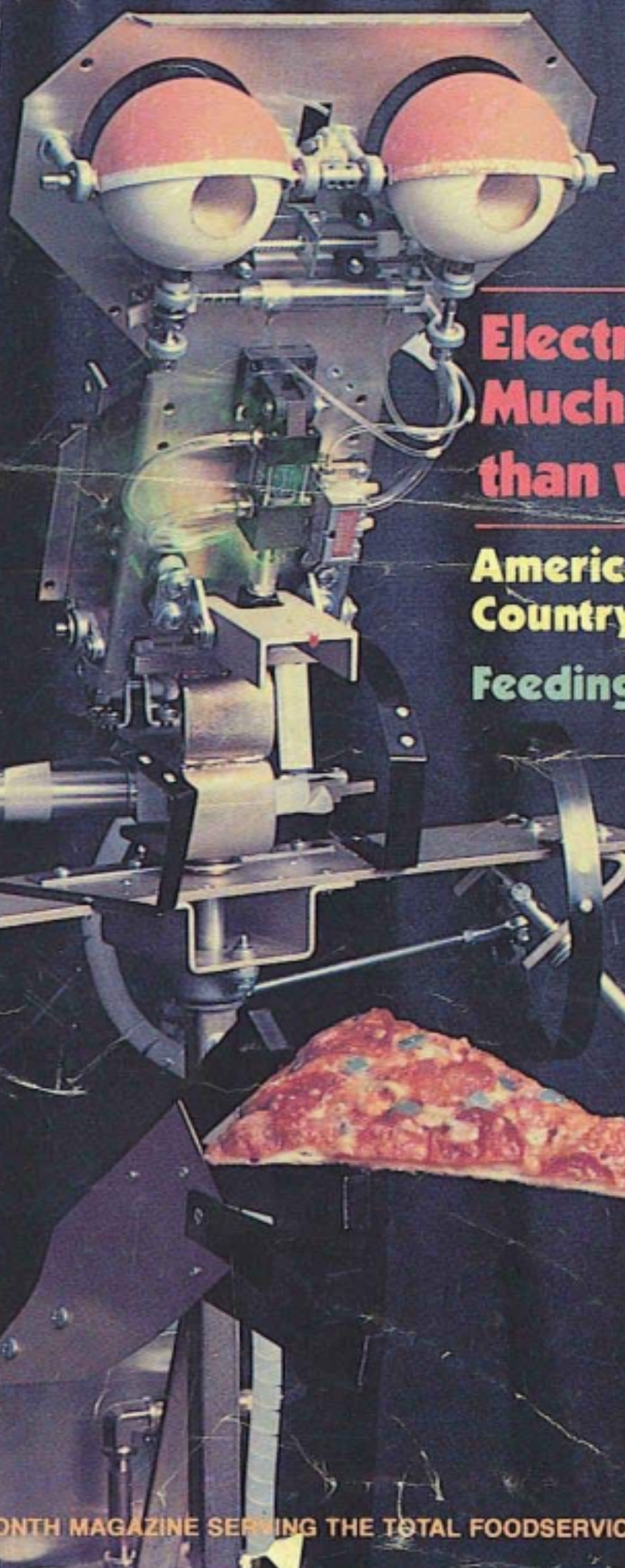
FEBRUARY 1, 1982

Restaurant & Institutions

Equipment series: Tabletops



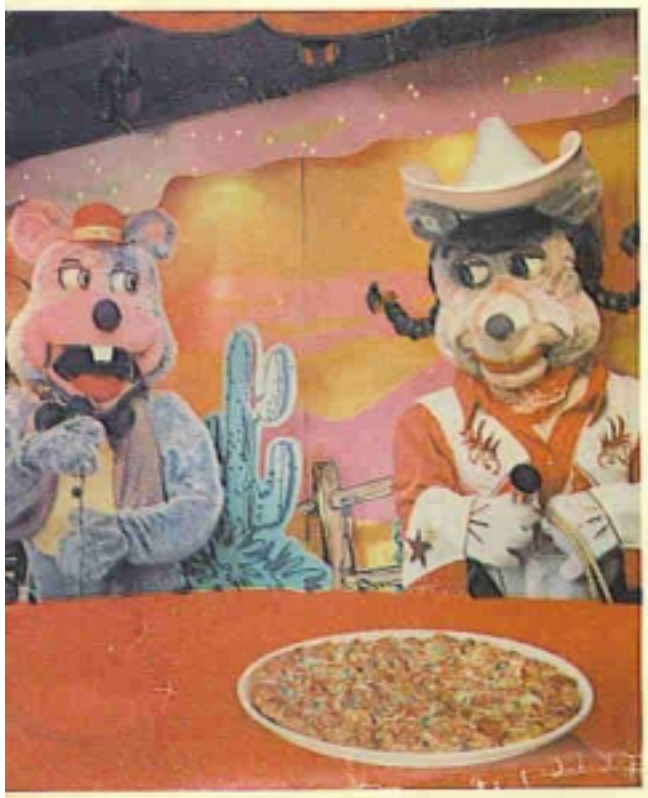
Electronic restaurants: Much more than video games

American cuisine series: Country ham country.

Feeding retirement communities.

THE TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE SERVING THE TOTAL FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY/CAHNERS PUBLICATION

THE ELECTRONIC RESTAURANTS



Pizza Time characters attract the children, but it's the food that keeps families coming back. Though the company once considered contracting out the food part of the business, experienced execs from companies such as Wendy's and Hardee's have helped Pizza Time develop products of which it is proud.

PIZZA TIME: 'WE'LL BURY THE GUYS WHO SAY OUR FOOD ISN'T GOOD.'

It's Always Fun Time at Pizza Time Theatres

Queen Elizabeth would not be amused. Walt Disney would—though he'd want the place to look a little tidier.

Kids adore Chuck E. Cheese's "PG-rated" Pizza Time Theatres (children under 18 must be accompanied by an adult).

Most of the typical unit's 250-300 seats are at large tables with benches in an open room. Up front is a stage, where characters burst into song and joke about every 15 minutes—a programmed show or "Happy Birthday" message hosted by Chuck E. Below the stage, children wind through a maze.

"Cabaret-style" dining is also provided—perhaps two areas with some 100 seats. Here, you deposit a token to be entertained by one character.

About 25% of the 10,000-sq.-ft. unit is devoted to games: row upon row of Pac-Man etc., dim and crowded, a kiddie casino. One section provides rides for tots too young to play the "slots." A souvenir stand is near the cash register.

The noise level is high. A marriage proposal could never be heard. But parents can linger over their beers while their kids run around—and nobody has to fear embarrassment.

This combinatiom of leisure activity with dining is as far removed from McDonald's as from Lutèce, says Nolan Bushnell. Patrons spend 40-45 minutes in the average pizza restaurant—but 2 hours and 14 minutes with Pizza Time. They travel an average 10 miles to get there.

The chain has carved itself a very definite niche. It's no fad, Bushnell insists: "There's a whole new group of kids every seven years."

on the night's projections. He can then call in extra help or send home a part-timer—instead of scheduling for peak demand all the time.

Along with better tenure (in 1981, Pizza Time's typical manager had been with the company only five months), this system is expected to trim labor costs—from 26% down to 17-18%.

"It frees up the manager to do what's really wanted: meet and greet and promote," says Bushnell.

Pizza Time has a lot more on tap for 1982. To freshen up its entertainment, for example, it has been testing a "carousel stool" for its cabaret. Put a token in the slot and the animated character at the piano sings for you—while your stool goes up and down in synch.

Pizza Time is also looking at educational games. Its executives point out that we used to scribble when we were learning to write. Video games, they say, are simply the "scribbling" of the computer age.

Embellishments on the chain's basic concept are taking shape. An ice cream parlor within the unit has been tested. So have "super stores" —18,000-20,000 sq. ft.—plus small stores in markets with 30,000-40,000 people. (The "normal" Pizza Time Theatre is 10,000 sq. ft.; in an area with 100,000-150,000 people.)

New tests include "Mr. Munch Trash Eater." When kids put trash in his mouth, Mr. Munch thanks them—and burps out game tokens. This is Pizza Time's answer to busing problems.

That points to the most exciting prospect: the unleashing of Pizza Time's creative energy and technological prowess to improve foodservice techniques.

"You can always break rules," Bushnell contends. "We plan to do some significant technological things in the restaurants." □

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Pizza Time builds its own robots in its Sunnyvale, Calif., factory. The basic robots (top l. and on the cover), which are computer-programmed to perform a myriad of tricks, are built on assembly lines. Each character, such as The King (top) is individually dressed using costumes provided by the wardrobe department (above). The characters take a prominent place at the center of the main dining room (l.) in each unit.